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Dr. Robert T. Conley interview (2) conducted on March 6, 1985 about the Boonshoft School of Medicine at Wright State University

Robert T. Conley

James St. Peter

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
School of Medicine Oral History Project

Interview date: March 6, 1985

Interviewer: James St. Peter (JS)

Interviewee: Robert Conley (RC), Former Dean of Science & Engineering, and former Vice President for Health Affairs Planning, Wright State University

JS: My name is James St. Peter, and this is the second in a series of interviews with Dr. Robert Conley, former Dean of Science and Engineering, and former Vice President for Health Affairs Planning at Wright State University. The date is March 6th, 1985, the time is 3:00pm, and Dr. Conley and I are in Suite 1010 of the Provident Bank Building in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Dr. Conley, in our last interview we covered up until the time the Governor had signed the authorization for the funds for the School of Medicine. I would like to go back and cover a few areas more in-depth, and first of all I would like to ask you about two individuals, let's start with Dr. Brage Golding, the first President of Wright State University, what kind of a man was he?

RC: In terms of his individual characteristics or his academic administrative characteristics.

JS: Both.

RC: I would say that Brage was a generally thoughtful super fair person in his kinds of evaluations of situations and then the matters. He was more of a scholar president then, say a public relations president. He was one of those independent thinkers who would, I don't know how to describe it, I guess have a greater degree of academic organization then you find in most presidents today. He was a startup President who would be ideal for an institution trying to develop a faculty corps for the institution, he was involved in the academic side of the shop, as well as trying to handle the external attributes of the institution. Brage was demanding, for example when I first interviewed at Wright State University, as part of that interview he asked one question. If you were selected to come here, what would be the time frame you would place on yourself to develop a graduate program in your area of study, if you were given this job. In other words he was looking at the University in a development sense and looking at where he saw it going and whether we were matching his view of where the institution would be say two or three years hence down the road. He was very interesting, he had very interesting dynamics about him, but he would be, in a sense of what a lot of institution presidents would do, he would be considered to probably be a presidential introvert, in the sense that he was an internal president rather than an external president. Most of us find ourselves being cast into the role of being external in most of our activities.

JS: What was he like individually?

RC: Of course he and I are in the same kind of discipline, and that's difficult to say. He's a good musician, very broad based, excellent carpenter in the sense that he did fine wood working. He had his natural hobbies and his outlet with music and I just thought he was an excellent individual kind of person, well rounded, thoughtful, and scrupulously fair to others, of course he was, from my perspective, and perhaps not to many other people. Brage was a logic kind of thinker, A led to B, B led to C. But he coupled that with a sensitivity to the people he worked with very very well, some of us don't, some of us are known as task masters, somewhat abrasive or sharp. Brage was not that type at all, he was the gentleman, quiet man, thoughtful man, that kind of person.

JS: Dr. John Millett.

RC: John was former president of Miami, brash, very demanding. You liked John, because John was a challenge as an individual. John was very interested in the development of Wright State, he was one of the, he and Novice Fawcett the two presidents of the two founding institutions were supportive of the development of Wright State and John when he moved from his position at Miami and moved to the Chancellor's Office I think almost had a little warm spot in his heart for Wright State and would probably listen to Wright State's appeal for its needs rather carefully and evaluate them. You couldn't help but like, not like John Millett, that's the kind of thing, of course now I've attended a number of his conferences now that he is in retirement but working for the academic development I guess at his corporation in New York. He is a stimulating kind of individual and he has very fixed thoughts on what higher education should be doing, and he challenges other people to think because he takes a position that he himself is trying to evaluate, is this the best way to go, and one of his things was institutional planning. And of course I got to know him later on, after four or five, better than I did early on, because that's where I finally wound up and a lot of things I was interested in doing was looking at institutional planning and how that kind of process can take place within an institution. John is an interesting guy, interesting man.

JS: How would you characterize his concern for the institution and his later actions concerning the medical school?

RC: It's hard to say, as a Chancellor of the State institution, I think John in the final analysis had to play the Chancellor's role in the milieu you find in that kind of project. And it's a political zoo, it's a political arena, it's not an academic arena, and remember John represented all the State and whether he was personally supportive, I had not opportunity to observe, I would say we got our shot at it at Wright State, as a young, new, growing institution, there are a number of environments in this country where you would say I won't even make the attempt to do this because I know simply because of our age and development stage we haven't even got a chance of getting a clear forum. From that perspective I would have to make the assumption that John was saying your young rabble rousers but go do your things. It's hard, you can't, I don't think, I've never discussed that with John and I don't honestly know, I know we got a fair trial at it, we got a fair day in court, and that's an accomplishment in itself, you could look at the well-established schools in Ohio, who were really in the that proposal milieu who wound up I think being thwarted in their attempts over the years, and I think Wright State, for its development,

faired very, very well. And we were, in fact, allowed to be competitive were I think steps could have been taken to discourage us from moving ahead, frankly.

JS: In our last interview you talked about an underlying support network for the School of Medicine in the community, I would like to focus on two areas in there, and one is the interests of the hospitals, and the second is the interests of the media, let's talk about the hospitals first.

RC: Alright, in the community, and I still, I can't fish back the dates, I'd have to go back to the early parts of the proposal itself, which is certainly a library document, but there is a list of individuals that were on the planning committee, of that group of individuals there's a number of them who were involved in the earlier attempts within Dayton to establish a medical education program. That network, predominantly, I guess was located, I guess the heart of it, the core of it, was located through the Miami Valley Hospital, that goes back, and I don't remember that, that's way back now and then, I was tangential then, because I wasn't even in Dayton at that time. But, was located at Miami Valley and had drawn in a number of other physicians from area hospitals who had a similar kind of interest. The medical society itself participated in that first study, and that meant that within the community there was among the physicians a position that had been taken years prior to medical education as a possibility in the community. Now that's something that is very, very important in the development of a community base kind of a medical school, because if that support network did not exist then Wright State's medical school in conceptually could not exist. So I think without that, the basic format plan, which we started with in that early feasibility study would have been an impractical plan without that prior network, and the way to get at the historical background of that, I'd think you'd have to go back actually to the, some of the earlier physicians who were involved from the medical society in Dayton who had endorsed the Miami Valley Hospital plan when it was first proposed, and if I remember right that was proposed about the same time frame the University of Toledo, not the University of Toledo...

JS: The Medical College of Ohio?

RC: The Medical College of Ohio was proposed for the Toledo area, and those two programs were two of them in that group, now I don't remember the dates of that, but that was back in the what, early sixties, probably around the time that Wright State was still building its first building or very shortly thereafter. So it was certainly several years before I arrived on the scene in Dayton. So, but that network, I felt, from after not very long in the early days of the exploration, that was an extremely strong group, and they were committed, and they were very vocal in their expression, yeah why don't Wright State and the medical community proceed with the plan. And that group was originally brought together, I don't think it was... that early exploration of the interest in the medical community, I think was something which Dick DeWall did, he began to filter out to the group within the Medical Society that he knew may be people that we should talk to or that he should talk to and began to put them together and that was really how it came together. And I think that was done with a degree of logic, I don't know how, where the information came from that Dick had, but certainly he was able to draw out some of those people that were involved in the earlier project at Miami Valley, he was able to convince them they should participate in this future study. And that's difficult because remember they lost that, you know you lose once you have a rejection, you lose your impedance to reinvent and he was able to bring that group back, and that was vital to what we were trying to do.

JS: What about the area media? Where they generally supportive of your efforts?

RC: Well there were certainly enough newspapers articles, we got some good press that we felt we needed. I would say both the Dayton Daily and the morning paper, was at that time what was it...

JS: The Journal Herald?

RC: The Journal Herald were both highly supportive of the institution. I'm trying to remember the name of the editor that was in Dayton.

JS: Was it Rosenbaum?

RC: No, the Editor in Chief at that time went on to Atlanta... gee, it was the editor of the newspaper, whose mother introduced us to the consultants we were using in Washington that led to the Veterans Administration grant that Wright State got as the first school in the nation and helped us get into, make sure we could get into that legislative process and make sure that we met all those criteria for the award of that. That actually came out of the editor, the then editor, of... Dan... geez and I will get his last name probably when we finish, but it was Dan and I can't remember his last name, but he was very helpful both in helping us get press coverage, but not only that he went beyond the press coverage and he took a personal interest in what we were trying to do, even to introducing us to people that might be of assistance to us on a broader spectrum, outside of Dayton in Washington and other areas, that could help us move, put the program further. He got involved actively, as I said, in introducing us to people who were instrumental in being able to massage legislation and to make suggestions as to how we might best fit into that potential program. We knew and were very familiar with the VA legislation before the bill was even passed, we had talked to the legislative aid of the Veteran's Affairs Committee while it was in the process of being written, we knew people who were on the Veteran's Affairs Committee and were visiting with some of their interest groups, certainly prior to any application phase. So we were sort of wired into the system and were able to understand what their requirements and needs were and that led us into some preliminary efforts with the VA hospital in Dayton and the whole thing finally gelled out in a grant application. So that was, when it finally wound up, we applied for that grant application, probably six, eight months or a year before Dean Belgium came on board. And I think our request was for something like 21 million dollars, from that program for a period of years, predominantly to support the buildup of faculty, and they had first year faculty 90%, 10% bored by the institution and then it scaled down. And that's a heck of a big part of medical school is while you are in the development phase you need to bring your faculty on board early for the planning of the school. John Belgium now expanded that grant in a modified application within, I would say, the first year that he came on board, and he escalated that grant application up to 33 million, that's a pretty substantial financial base to bring the medical school into being and make it a reality. Without it I don't think that Wright State Medical School would have gotten off the ground as healthy as it did. That really started, the germ of that, started in the Editors in Chief office downtown in the Dayton Daily building.

JS: Who were the major Dayton based politicians?

RC: Dan Mahoney.

JS: Dan Mahoney, where's he at?

RC: Okay it takes a little while, I'm digging.

JS: Who were the major Dayton politicians who were substantially involved in pushing the medical school application?

RC: Alright, there was absolutely no Dayton Politician, either Republican or Democrat who did not support the medical school. The person who was probably the strongest in conviction and who also came out of the milieu of the earlier Miami Valley Hospital was Clara Weisenborn.

JS: Tell me about Mrs. Weisenborn.

RC: Mrs. Weisenborn was the kind of person who bite into something that she felt would be good for the community, and she just would simply hang on, and I think probably she would let her teeth break off before she would let lose. She just was highly committed to the community of Dayton and she fought very, very hard for various projects in Dayton, the medical school was one of those she was interested, and had be interested for years. Clara was very supportive all the way along of what we were doing, and I think we will get into some of that later on because it goes into the legislative hearings we used to attend where she was chairman of the committee or a member of the committee, or even some where she wasn't she would come in to make sure I didn't make the wrong comment or something. I could, hell I could get her, she would sit across the room and I would sort of get a high sign like get off of that as rapidly as you can, and let them go on to something else, don't mess around in there because it could be muddy water, it could be quicksand. And she would, she taught me a lot about politics as a relatively, as an academician, and naïve as hell, Clara was just a resource person for us at the institution to do the things we had to do, without making too many blundering idiot kinds of mistakes. Which we, you know, which I, I had a propensity for doing it, I stick my foot in my mouth and it didn't take very long to do it, and Clara was a very excellent advisor, and she would say these are things you just don't do, and take heed young man because you're going to get in trouble. So she was just a hell of a fine person, she was very supportive of us at the institution, but not only for medicine, Clara was always supportive of Wright State, always. From the time I first meat Clara Weisenborn she supported on a broad base Wright State University, period. Medicine just happened to be also a primary interest and the two fused together very, very nicely. So we knew we had an ally in Columbus and she was in the center.

JS: What about CJ McLin?

RC: CJ was the chairperson, when I first got to know CJ he was the chairperson of the Ohio Black Caucus. There was something in our last interview that I thought about afterwards about that relationship. In the development of that final proposal we had formed a committee, a working committee, between Ed Spangler, myself, a representative from Central State, and a

representative from Miami. And it was a biologist from Miami, Charlie, I'd have to look these people up, because you know there's list of people we had involved at various levels and various committees. But, we used to meet regularly, and it was through that group that we got to know Carl Jenkins who was then chairman of the board of Central State, and Carl and another, a dentist, Carl was an MD, there was a dentist on the board, and CJ, we began to talk to CJ as far as the proposal was concerned, and what had to be done. And then of course CJ and Bob Kegerreis were fairly close because that's part of, that's Bob's activity. CJ became interested and supportive of the proposal and of course from that base he was able to, and because we were involved with Central State, he was able to influence the Black Caucus in securing support for the medical school, which gave us a little, a broadening out effect, with respect to the kind of, it fell outside of Dayton, we began to get a State wide kind of exposure. So CJ became involved in supporting and doing what he could both with the Democratic, other Democratic legislators in Dayton, because he was one who could organize that group and bring them together and they in turn could get their points of view expressed in support. So, CJ became instrumental a little after on than Clara, he was in the House, doing a counterpart, he was the House counterpart of Clara Weisenborn with respect to development and support of the school.

JS: Did he attend hearings with you?

RC: No, we really, well, that's not correct. We had in that time period, we had focused a lot of our attention on the Senate Finance and the Senate Education Committee; because apparently that's where the stumbling block was felt it was going to be from everything we had been able to ascertain. We did not devote as much attention to the counterpart house committees, those committees that we did was, yes CJ was active and present. In the areas where, I would say, the majority of the real activity was concerned was at the Senate level and I think if you look at the distribution of Senators that was where, if it was going legislatively to get shot out or shot down, that would have been where in occurred. And we felt that if we got the bill through the House with a majority vote, then we would help the Senate along, therefore we wanted to develop some real heavy committee work within the Senate. So we dealt with the Senate Finance Committee and the Senate Education Committee so that the counterpart bill was going through the Senate and then we had CJ working at the House level and sponsoring the bill for the school in the house. So we had, you had to do both, you know work on both sides of the fence.

JS: Was Mrs. Weisenborn a member of the, either one of those Senate Committees?

RC: She was chairman of the Education Committee, at one point, and a member of the Finance Committee.

JS: That's pretty good representation.

RC: Yes, that was excellent it was very very handy to have at that time.

JS: Where there other politicians besides those two who stood out in efforts to work towards getting a medical school in Dayton, who you had to rely upon at various times.

RC: Oh my goodness, I would say at that time and I would have to go down through the list. There was Leonard, there was...

JS: Paul Leonard?

RC: Paul Leonard, at one point Paul was very active and pushing very hard, they sort of each had a little piece and I would have to go back and really reconstruct that thing, but Paul was active. Who was chairman of the Dayton Democratic Party at that point? Paul Tipps, at that time was active with the legislative group as a whole, and he would bring them all together and I think they were, they might have even been farming things out for all I knew, I don't know what went on in their inner chambers because we weren't, I was not there at that point. But there was, former Mayor's son, geez, in Washington now, building, you pass the building downtown of his fathers, oh my goodness he's a legend in Dayton, alright I'll dig that one out to, he was a young, what's the former Mayor's name before...

JS: Magee?

RC: No, before Magee. Okay, I'll get there, but they were all, each one had their own little role, at one time or another in that process. I honestly, can't...

JS: Was it Larry Freise?

RC: No, Larry was, he was there at that point, but gee Irish name, oh God, well I'll dig it up. He's now, he's in Congress in the State of the Ohio, Senator, not Senator, but Congressman from the State of Ohio, from Dayton.

JS: Talbot?

RC: Nope, well anyway we'll get there, they all at that point, I don't know of anyone who didn't participate at one point or another, at one level or another. He had in that group, there was Fred Young at one point, CJ, Ed Leonard, and of course the Democratic chairman was Paul Tipps, and boy what a block on the former Mayor of Dayton and his son, because they were supporters as well, and actively supportive, so I just drew a blank on that one.

JS: When you were selling the program in the community, you said you went out to the churches whenever possible, what were some of the groups you that were targeting to talk to and what kind of presentations did you make to them?

RC: Well, we had a series of about 15, which would be cards, which finally went to slides, somewhere should be still, you know there all at Wright State has somewhere archived or in somebody's closet there still there. Are presentation basically focused on; one a shortage of physicians that were serving in the primary entry levels in medicine, and we described the kind of plan that we had, we described the general course of that plan, we described what it meant to the community in terms of better care and better coordination in utilization of community resources. It was a general dog and pony show you would give, I suppose you could parallel that, I did use the word dog and pony show didn't I, apparently you shouldn't, but that's what it was,

it was a dog and pony show. It would parallel, if you were going to go out and talk about DP&L trying to justify a rate hike, and having to present that rate hike to the Public Utilities Commission and you wanted to engendered community support, well we were using the same tactic.

JS: If you were going to go out and say, talk to a church, would you tailor your program to them, or was it just a general kind of thing?

RC: General presentation, and we would go out for example, either before or after the service when they had their men's group or whatever they did at that particular church. We would go to virtually any requester, we would talk to, if they ten people there, we would be out, it didn't make any difference. If I could get 15 people in a room I would talk about Wright State Medical School. It's like if you're going to run for office, you knock on doors, alright, so there is a tactic and there is a way you can do that. Now all's I was doing was trying to take in, assuming that you're going to hit some community leadership, you're going to hit the minister of that church who can influence other people, if you can get the minister and say the elders of the church over onto your side, if there is ever a conversation about controversy over the medical school, if they are familiar with what we are trying to accomplish in that community, at least they had heard it from us, they are not going to get it from some other source that might distort that, so we made a conscious effort to do as much as that kind of presentation as we possibly could. And you never know where your support base is, in the community at large, we knew the medical community was going to help, so therefore all we wanted to do was say this is what our plan is all about, so there is absolutely no confusion. We had an article we did in the Daytonian, "A New Prescription in Medicine" that I wrote one afternoon or in my office, and we used that vehicle to get out the concept in the community, and that goes back, I think I've got the thing next door, and that goes back to, oh I guess, I don't remember the date but it was midpoint in the developmental process, and it was the kind of thing you would find in a doctor's offices and in attorneys' offices and in the barber shop, all over town. We got a lot of messages out through that, just by that one, I guess it was a two and a half or three page description of the plan. Of what we were trying to do and what we're trying to accomplish. And it had tremendous community impact, at least I felt it did.

JS: How did this selling of the program to the community effect your work as Dean of Science and Engineering?

RC: You know quite frankly, I don't think it did, at that time. I was blessed with a hell of fine faculty in that College, and a real good series of department chairman, who, I think, would have gone to hell with me and back, you know I, they really, they were that, both the faculty group and the department chairman that I had were just superb, they were superb. As a dean if you have good department chairman, your job is easy. And I felt very comfortable we were able to do both without any difficulty, but that was because I had Brian Hutchins on that group, at that time I had Jim Knowles, Department Chairman in Geology, I had Harv Hanson who was doing the work in physics, I had Bob Dixon who was kicking up the computer science department for me, I had Janet Kowalski in engineering, I had just a superb group of guys, they were good solid department chairmen for were we were at Wright State at that time. And we worked well as a team, because when we put our budgets together for example, if we had to cut our budget I felt

very comfortable with calling all the department chairmen together in a room, at five o'clock at night, and at seven o'clock coming out with budgets that everybody, in the whole college could deal with and there would be no anger. In other words, they could go back to their respective departments and say we got a fair hearing on this priority, we got a fair hearing on that priority. So we had just a good working group and a good working relationship so I didn't have a problem, I felt very comfortable with them and we probably, it's like, it's like heaping work on somebody, sometimes there is a level in which you put work on an individual that everybody does better because of it, and they fill in each other's gaps, and I think that's what happened to us, we all were just, you know, I was getting home maybe one night a week at that point, and we thrived on it as a group, we had no, we had no real, we just had a hell of a good time, we were having, basically I think the group that was together, although we were working hard and we were spending a lot of time, really were having fun at it, we enjoyed pretty much what we were doing. Secondly, we had sounding boards within the college, you know, for example if I wanted a chapter read in a medical proposal or something I had Brian Hutchins and his group in the biological sciences upstairs that would take it for three or four days and rip it apart, and then help us put it back together. So we had an internal team of people, just who were willing to spend time in working with us in putting the whole proposal together, so you know we had a good rapport going.

JS: Who was besides Dr. Hutchins, who were some of the other prominent people on that team?

RC: I'd have to say that in the medical school the two, obviously one was Ed, who was just the outstanding, just outstanding.

JS: Doctor Spangler?

RC: Yeah, and Brian, Brian Hutchins. I mean everyone else helped out, but those two just were they were the, there kinds of things we could have something we felt was something worthwhile for consideration for the whole planning committee, and you know you're never sure. The three of us would read it over and then we would just scribble all over it. And then we would either get together or Ed and I would sit down and talk about the problems and clean it up. So there was a lot of that kind of comparison, but I think really, those two would be, they so outweighed everyone else, it was overwhelming, maybe just because of just their commitment and interest it was a night and day comparison at that time, we didn't have many people in the early days when we started, so I relied pretty heavily on Brian.

JS: Well it seems like I have ran out of time in for this interview.

RC: Already?

JS: Time seems to go very quickly in these things, and in the next I'd like to talk about your move from the position of Dean to Vice President for Health Affairs Planning and selection of the Dean of the medical school.